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# On the trail of a missing aviator, Saint-Exupéry

By John Tagliabue

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**MARSEILLE:** After the disappearance of Amelia Earhart, the demise of the French aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry on a reconnaissance mission in World War II has ranked as one of flying's great mysteries.

Now, thanks to some sleuthing by a French diver and marine archaeologist, the final pieces of the puzzle seem to have been filled in.

The story that emerged about the disappearance of Saint-Exupéry, in self-exile from Vichy France, proved to contain several narratives, a complexity that would probably have pleased the author of several adventure books on flying and the famous tale "The Little Prince," about a little interstellar traveler, which was also a profound statement of faith.

On July 31, 1944, Saint-Exupéry took off from the island of Corsica in a Lockheed P-38 Lightning reconnaissance plane, one of numerous French pilots who assisted the U.S. war effort.

"They were rebels, you could almost say terrorists," said the diver Luc Vanrell, in his small office in view of the sea. "They fought without having their own country."



Hans Fahrenberger/ Immdras, via The Associated Press

A 1944 photograph of former Luftwaffe pilot Horst Rippert at an unknown location.

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Saint-Exupéry never returned, and over the years numerous theories arose: that he had been shot down, lost control of his plane, even that he committed suicide.

The first clue surfaced in September 1998, when fishermen off this Mediterranean port city dragged up a silver bracelet with their nets. It bore the names of Saint-Exupéry and his New York publisher. Further searches by divers turned up the badly damaged remains of his plane, though the body of the pilot was never found.

"I had just seen 'Titanic,' and after a few glasses of pastis I reflected, 'We'll make a movie, and the dollars will rain,'" said Jean-Claude Bianco, 63, on whose boat the bracelet was discovered.

The film was never made, but news of the bracelet prompted Vanrell, 48, to inspect more closely some marine wreckage he had noticed years before, buried in sand in more than 50 meters, about 170 feet, of water near the remains of Saint-Exupéry's plane.

An engine block serial number and a Skoda symbol, for the Czech company that was a German supplier, proved it to be a Daimler-Benz V-12 aircraft engine.

In 2005, after enduring numerous bureaucratic delays, Vanrell and another diver, Lino von Gartzten, lifted the motor and shipped it to Munich for study by German experts. It turned out to be part of a series produced in early 1941 - the oldest spark plug was from March 1941. It had been modified in 1943 with the addition of a Bosch fuel injection pump.

The researchers deduced that it had powered a Messerschmitt fighter plane, part of a training unit stationed in southern France from 1942 to 1944. It had been flown by Prince Alexis von Bentheim und Steinfurt, a 22-year-old pilot who was shot down by American planes in late 1943, on his first, and last, solo flight.

The tale might have ended there, with the death of the prince and of the author of "The Little Prince."

Yet von Gartzten was not content. Consulting archives and with the help of the staff of the Jägerblatt, a magazine for Luftwaffe veterans, he tracked down veterans who had flown in von Bentheim's unit, the Jagdgruppe 200. He contacted hundreds of former pilots, most now in their 80s; hundreds more had already died.

Then in July 2006, he telephoned a former pilot in Wiesbaden, Germany, Horst Rippert, explaining that he sought information about Saint-Exupéry.

Without hesitating, Rippert replied: "You can stop searching. I shot down Saint-Exupéry."

Rippert, who will be 86 in May, worked as a television sports reporter after the war. It was only days after he had shot down a P-38 with French colors near Marseille that he learned of Saint-Exupéry's disappearance.

He was convinced he had shot him down, though he confided his conviction only to a diary. In 2003, when he learned that Saint-Exupéry's plane had been found, his suspicion was confirmed. But still he said nothing publicly.

Over the years, the thought that he may have killed Saint-Exupéry had troubled Rippert. As a youth in the 1930s, he had idolized the aviator-turned-author and had devoured his books, beginning with "Southern Mail," in 1929, an adventure tale written while Saint-Exupéry was flying the Casablanca-to-Dakar route.

When Rippert's identity was finally made public in March, the storm of interview requests and efforts to contact him was such that he withdrew from sight.

"The last days have been terrible, with phone calls and doorbells ringing all hours of the day and night," said his wife, by telephone, before hanging up.

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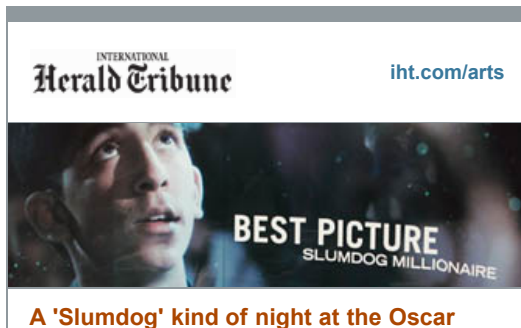
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